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ABSTRACT

A recent national survey of U.S. adults examined public opinion about welfare reform and measured support for specific policy recommendations. Respondents report ambivalence about the success of welfare reform, though they agree on what the goals of welfare should be and what shape future reforms should take. They favor welfare policies that help improve the lives of low-income children, funding for quality after-school programs in low-income neighborhoods, and helping low-income working parents find and finance quality childcare. They are concerned about welfare reform's possible effects on children. Respondents recognize the importance of families, enthusiastically supporting efforts to encourage non-custodial fathers to support their children. While respondents consider it vital to move beneficiaries from welfare to work, they want help for those on welfare to obtain the education and skills they need to get better paying jobs with opportunities for growth. Respondents are increasingly supportive of efforts to help low-income families through difficult economic times. They report being willing to make sacrifices in order to help those in need and favor providing additional assistance to working poor families with children, even if it means providing less tax relief to people like themselves. (SM)

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PUBLIC VIEWS ON WELFARE AND CHILDREN IN THE CURRENT ECONOMY

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The Future of Children

PUBLIC VIEWS ON WELFARE REFORM AND CHILDREN IN THE CURRENT ECONOMY

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, in conjunction with the release of *The Future of Children* journal, commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) to conduct a national poll to explore current public opinion about welfare reform, and measure support for specific policy recommendations. This national survey of 1,002 adults, conducted January 31 – February 4, 2002, finds the American public is ambivalent about the success of welfare reform. However, there is broad agreement about what the goals of welfare should be and what shape future reforms should take:

- Americans favor welfare policies that help improve the lives of children in low-income families. Strong majorities support funding for quality after-school programs in low-income neighborhoods and helping low-income working parents find and finance quality childcare.

- The public is concerned about welfare reform's possible effects on children. Those who fear welfare reform has hurt children in low-income families are among its harshest critics.

- Americans recognize the importance of families. The public enthusiastically supports efforts to encourage non-custodial fathers to support their children emotionally and financially. However, they are only lukewarm about welfare policies aimed at encouraging unmarried couples with children to marry.

- While the public believes it is vital to move beneficiaries from welfare to work, just putting people into jobs is not enough. They strongly support measures aimed at helping those on welfare to obtain the education and develop the skills they need to get better paying jobs with opportunities for growth.

- With the backdrop of the continuing economic downturn, the survey finds Americans are increasingly supportive of efforts to help low-income families through these difficult

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times. A majority favor lifting restrictions to allow welfare recipients to participate more in job training and education programs. Likewise, more and more Americans favor temporarily suspending the five year time limit on receiving welfare benefits.

- Americans are willing to make sacrifices in order to help those in need. Decreasing welfare spending is a lower public priority than helping people out of poverty and into good jobs. Moreover, the majority of Americans say they favor providing additional assistance to working poor families with children, even if it means providing less tax relief to people like themselves.

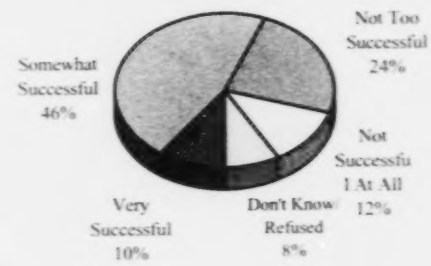
These and other survey results can be found in detail on the following pages.

DETAILED FINDINGS

The Public Sees Welfare Reform as a Success, but NOT an Overwhelming One

As Figure One illustrates, Americans have guardedly positive opinions about the success of welfare reform. Just over half (56%) feel the effort has been successful, but over a third (36%) are dubious about its success. Most Americans are restrained in their assessments; very few feel welfare reform has been *very* successful (10%) or *not at all* successful (12%). This ambivalence is widespread; with few exceptions, different demographic and ideological groups all give welfare reform decidedly mixed reviews.

Figure One:
Judging the Success of Welfare Reform



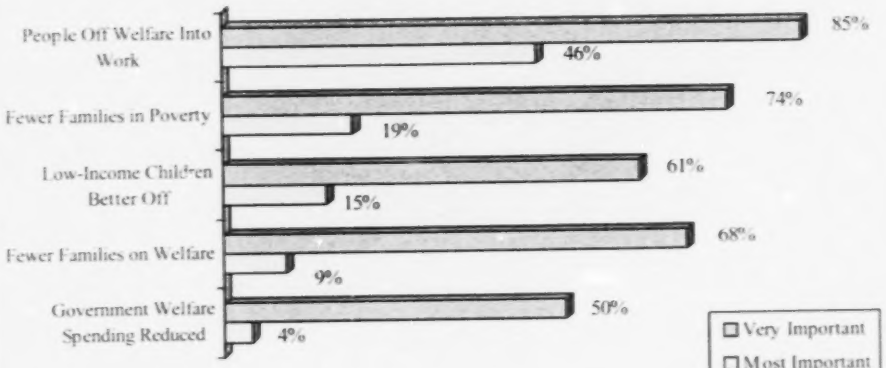
Welfare Reform Should Move People Into Jobs, and Out of Poverty

To explore what criteria should be used in judging welfare reform, respondents rated and ranked several factors. As Figure Two shows, most agree a key factor in measuring the success of welfare reform is moving people off of welfare and into work. Over eight in ten (85%) feel this should be a *very* important factor, and a plurality (46%) see it as the single most important one. This view is widely held across demographic and ideological groups. This is not surprising; after all, welfare reform's main goal, in both political rhetoric and public discourse, has always been moving welfare recipients into the workforce.

However, the public is not focused *solely* on moving people from welfare to work. They are also concerned about improving conditions for families and children. Three quarters (74%) feel a decrease in the number of families living in poverty should be very important in judging welfare reform. Six in ten (61%) feel the well-being of children in low-income families should be very important. The public considers having fewer families on welfare less important than having fewer families in poverty.

The least important factor of those measured is a reduction in welfare spending. Half (50%) say lowering expenditures is very important, and one in twenty (4%) feel this should be the main factor in judging success. Democrats (41%) and Independents (50%) are less likely than Republican respondents (58%) to feel decreases in government spending should be very important. But, even among Republicans this is the lowest priority. It seems the public is willing to support government spending for programs to help welfare beneficiaries into good jobs and onto a better future.

Figure Two:
Factors In Judging the Success of Welfare Reform



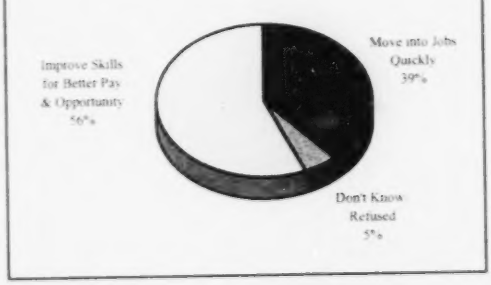
The survey provides additional evidence that Americans favor helping low-income families even if it affects their own pocketbook. In response to a different question, seven in ten (69%) say they favor "providing additional assistance to working poor families with children even if it means providing less tax relief to people like themselves." Majorities of Democrats (79%), Independents (68%), and Republicans (58%) share this view.

Getting Better Jobs Is More Important than Getting Jobs Quickly

Other results reinforce that Americans want welfare reform to go beyond just moving people into jobs. Respondents were asked whether the government should move people from welfare to work as quickly as possible *or* help them develop the skills to get better jobs. As Figure Three shows, the majority (56%) favor helping people improve their skills so they have opportunities for a better future. Four in ten (39%) feel putting people into the workforce quickly is more important.

Democrats and Independents are likely to prefer skills development (61% and 57% respectively) to swift employment (37%, 40%). Republicans are about equally divided between those who prefer working toward better pay and opportunities (47%) and those who want to move people quickly into jobs (45%). Americans who have been welfare or food stamp beneficiaries are especially likely to feel that skills development is preferable to quick employment (69% vs. 27%).

Figure Three:
How Best to Move People from Welfare to Work



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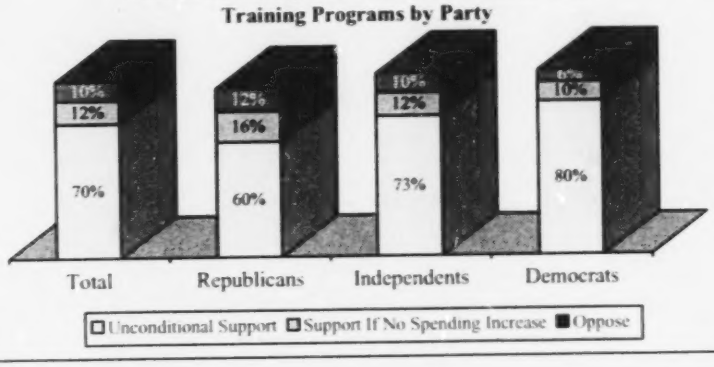
Education and Training Are Worthwhile Investments, Especially During Hard Times

Americans support lifting restrictions so welfare beneficiaries can participate more in education and training programs, to help them get good jobs when the economy improves. Nine in ten (88%) support this measure, including two thirds (66%) who strongly support it. Moreover, as Figure Four shows, a seven in ten majority (70%) would support this measure *even* if it meant an increase in government spending. Majorities of Republicans (60%), Independents (73%) and Democrats (80%) all support this measure even if it requires increased spending.

Figure Four:
Position on Lifting Restrictions on Education and Training Programs by Party



Given Tough Economic Times, Many Are Willing to Suspend Time Limits

As the economic downturn continues, more Americans support temporarily lifting the five-year time limit on receiving welfare benefits. As Table One shows, in October 2001, under half (46%) of those surveyed supported the temporary suspension of time limits, and only about one in six (16%) strongly supported this measure. Currently, a six in ten (59%) majority support this idea and almost three in ten (28%) are strongly supportive.

Table One:
Position on Temporarily Suspending Welfare Time Limits

	Oct. 01*	Current
Support (total)	46	59
Strongly support	16	28
Somewhat support	30	31
Oppose (total)	51	37
Somewhat oppose	22	15
Strongly oppose	29	22

** LSPA for Jobs for the Future, October 9-10, 2001 n=803*

Almost half (47%) would support the suspension of time limits even if it leads to an increase in government spending. However, support does vary by party, as Figure Five shows. A six in ten majority of Democrats (58%) would support this measure even if it led to increased expenditures compared with just under half (47%) of Independents and just over a third (36%) of Republicans.

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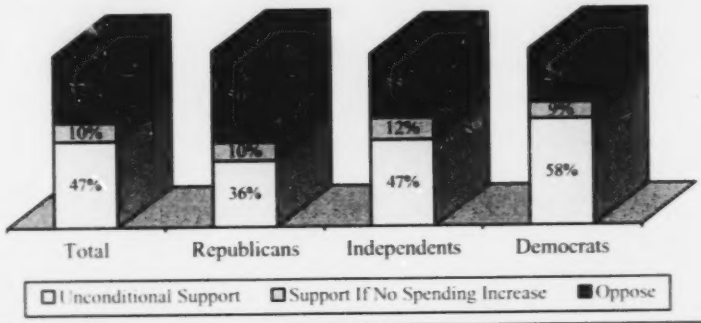
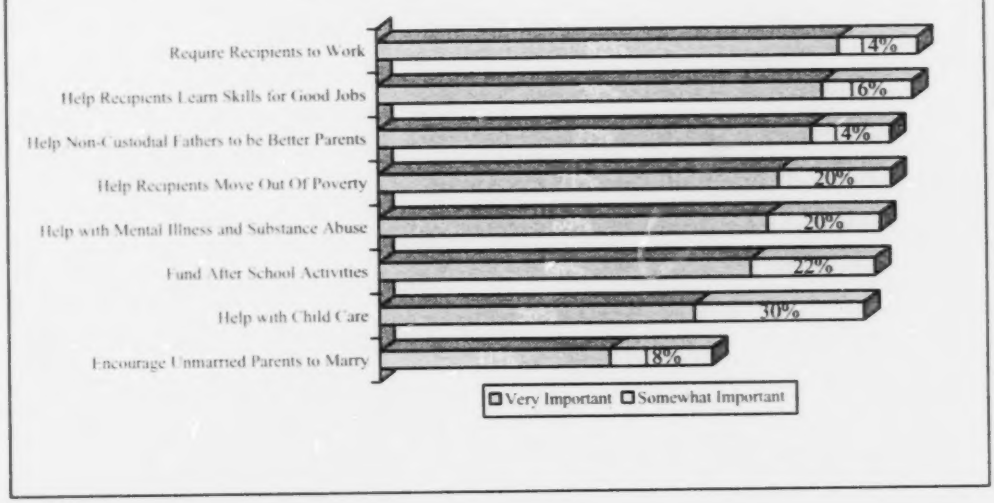
Figure Five:
Position on Temporarily Suspending Five-Year Welfare Time Limit by Party



Americans Have Many Goals for Welfare Reform

Another series of questions asked respondents how important it was for government programs aimed at helping low-income families, like welfare, to focus on specific goals. Figure Six shows that requiring recipients to work once again tops the list – an overwhelming majority (96%) feel this is important, including eight in ten (82%) who believe it is *very* important. Almost as important are helping welfare recipients develop the skills they need for good jobs, and helping recipients move out of poverty.

Figure Six:
How Important is it for Government Programs Like Welfare to...



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Many feel other goals, in addition to employment and alleviating poverty, are also vital. Seven in ten (69%) say "helping low-income families deal with problems such as mental illness and substance abuse" is very important. Those with welfare experience (79%) and Democrats (78%) are especially enthusiastic about this objective, but majorities of Independents (70%) and Republicans (57%) agree this is very important too.

Nine in ten (91%) feel it is important to "help low-income fathers who are not living with their children to find jobs, pay child support and become better parents." Three quarters (77%) feel this is *very* important. Those with experience with welfare are especially supportive of this goal – 85% rate this very important – as are Democrats (83%).

The public does not appear to share the current Administration's interest in making marriage a top priority of welfare policy. While a majority does feel "encourage unmarried couples with children to get married" is important (59%), only four in ten (41%) say it is *very* important. It is the lowest ranked of the items measured.

Children's Well-Being is Critical

The public is concerned about how children and families fare under welfare reform. As Figure Two (page 4) showed, a six in ten majority (61%) believe the well-being of children in low-income families should be very important in judging welfare reform; almost one in six (15%) feel it should be the primary factor. Figure Six shows strong support for funding high-quality after school programs for children in low-income neighborhoods (88%) and helping low-income working parents find and pay for high-quality childcare (86%).

Another finding reinforces that the well-being of children is vital in judging welfare reform. Americans who believe welfare has hurt children are much more likely to see welfare reform as a failure (57%) than a success (36%). They are the only subgroup in the survey with a negative assessment of welfare reform. Almost three in ten (28%) feel welfare reform has not been successful *at all*. (See Table 2)

Table Two - Success of Welfare Reform by its Effects on Children

Success of Welfare Reform	Total	***As far as you know, has welfare reform done more to help or hurt children in low-income families, or aren't you sure?***		
		Helped	**Not Sure**	**Hurt**
Very Successful	10	17	3	**8**
Somewhat Successful	46	50	50	**28**
Not too successful	24	20	27	**29**
Not successful at all	12	6	10	**28**
Don't know/Refused	8	7	10	**6**

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